

## A Traditional Method of Hunting Dusky Sengis in Southern Malawi

Galen Rathbun<sup>1</sup>, Jack Dumbacher<sup>1</sup>, and Robert Nyirenda<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Birds and Mammals, California Academy of Sciences, San Francisco, California, USA. [grathbun@calacademy.org](mailto:grathbun@calacademy.org), [jdumbacher@calacademy.org](mailto:jdumbacher@calacademy.org) <sup>2</sup> Thangadzi River Conservancy, Kaombe Ranch, Agricane Ltd., Malawi.

In late May 2018, we spent about a week in the lower Shire Valley of southern Malawi assessing the rarity of the dusky sengi, *Elephantulus fuscus*. This species has a relatively restricted distribution in the region ([www.sengis.org/distribution](http://www.sengis.org/distribution)), and its phylogenetic relationship to other species in the genus is not well understood (Corbet and Hanks 1968, Smit et al., 2011). Both of these factors are important in determining the IUCN Red List status of the Dusky Sengi.

We were based at the Thangadzi River Conservancy in the Kaombe Ranch in the lower Shire Valley, and we had the opportunity to observe the local Sena people using their traditional method of capturing these sengis. We learned that their technique is very efficient because it takes advantage of several aspects of the unusual natural history of the smaller sengis (Rathbun 2009), including their highly cursorial and swift locomotion, their adherence to a well-defined trail system that the sengis maintain through the surface litter, and their lack of burrow use. Below, are several photos (by authors) and captions illustrating the trapping method the Sena people used.



**Figure 1:** The Dusky Sengi is the size of a mouse, about 23 cm long including the tail, and weighing about 45 g. It is found mainly in southern Malawi and barely extends into Mozambique and Zambia.



**Figure 2:** Chief Stuart Semba (left) and his son Moses made six traps, which were about 75 cm long funnels woven from dried palm leaves. The circular mouths of the funnels were about 7 cm in diameter, and the small pointed ends were tied closed with a rubber band, probably cut from a bicycle inner tube.



**Figure 3:** Dusky Sengis actively build and maintain trails through habitat mosaics of grass and bush thickets. Their trails are usually a distinct straight series of little bald spots (between yellow stars) in the leaf litter, where they land while moving along their trail.



**Figure 4:** *The funnel traps were placed on these trails, all facing in the same direction, so that a sengi racing along a trail would encounter a funnel.*



**Figure 5:** *Once the traps were carefully placed on trails, several hunters lined up on the opposite end of the thicket, and with sticks, rocks, and clumps of soil “beat” the vegetation to flush and drive sengis from their resting places and down their trails towards the traps. Because these sengis do not usually retreat into burrows, there was a reasonably good chance that a trap would be encountered.*



**Figure 6:** The fleeing sengis raced along their well-maintained trails at a high speed ahead of the beaters, and rushed blindly into one of the funnels, which they apparently perceived as an open tunnel through the dense vegetation surrounding their neatly maintained trail.



**Figure 7:** The high speed of the sengi wedged it into the narrow end of the funnel, with its long antelope-like legs protruding through the woven funnel and preventing it from backing out. Sengis were easily removed from a trap by unwinding the rubber band at the narrow end of the funnel.

The four-toed sengi, *Petrodromus tetradactylus*, is captured in the same way because it has similar natural history traits as *E. fuscus*. However, because *Petrodromus* is larger in girth than *Elephantulus*, the funnel opening is made slightly larger. Typically, young boys hunt both sengis, which are cooked and eaten. They report that the sengis are quite tasty.

This capture technique was repeated for us in different thicket patches, and the team of six people were able to capture four sengis in only a couple hours one morning. This suggests that *E. fuscus* may not be particularly rare, where its habitat mosaic of thicket and grass has not been removed for subsistence farming. Unfortunately for this sengi, the human population in southern Malawi is large, and relatively little land remains uncultivated.

We are grateful to Chief Stuart Semba and his family and neighbours, who expertly demonstrated their sengi capture method. We also thank Bouke Bijl, Bruce Carruthers, and Simon Ibeetson of Agricane Ltd. for their hospitality and support while we were in Malawi.

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